

## A Near Miss At A Harvard Education

(A "now it can be told" Story)

By the Rev. CANON ROBERT MERRY

"How in the world did you ever have the courage to hire me sight unseen from 5,000 miles away and give me a contract for 2 years' teaching at your Iolani School? It was a long shot, and I wonder what ingredients went into that decision?"

It was my question to the school's headmaster. We were having a relaxed moment after Sunday afternoon prayers and I was enjoying a cup of tea for a moment with him. The time seemed to provide a proper setting for such a question. It had often plagued me. I had been teaching at the school for a year and a half, and was enjoying a modest success. I felt the time was right to clear up the point. (Clipper readers may recall my many references to this experience of teaching at this Episcopal Church Mission School in Hawaii between college and seminary.)

The headmaster replied, "Well, it was like this, you know I am a graduate of Powder Point School in Duxbury." (I was not aware of this until that moment.) "You must also remember that one of the great moments in the weekly life of a student there was the Sunday afternoon unsupervised walk along King Caesar Rd. and Powder Point Ave. and up the hill beyond the stone bridge over Blue Fish River to Paul Peterson's drugstore. There we gorged ourselves on milkshakes, sodas, ice cream and peanut-butter cheese nabs. Then we walked back to the school for the night's study hall. It was our regular Sunday ritual, and you probably remember as a youngster this mob of 150 boys shouting and jostling one another on the way right past your front door on Washington St." I did indeed remember this rowdy mob and I also remember how my mother complained to father about their roughness. But father shushed her with the reminder that the school was the best customer for milk from our dairy farm on North Hill and we certainly did not want to offend them. Besides Frederick Knapp, the school's founder, was his closest friend in town (they jointly began the Duxbury Fire Department) and the school brought many benefits to town in its outstanding teachers (Mr. Moulton, headmaster for many years I remember well as moderator of town meeting). There was also Harold Stetson, whose charm had won the hand of the lovely daughter Grace of the town's oldest pastor, the saintly Rev. Lewis Thomas.

The headmaster went on: "Well, one fall Sunday afternoon we students, all 150 of us were filling sidewalks on both sides of the street in front of Peterson's Drugstore (now Duxbury Galleries) munching out ice cream cones, drinking our milkshakes and sodas and there were a few townspeople there with us for some reason, including your father. All of a sudden a panicky shout was heard, 'look out everybody, a runaway' and down there crossing the stone bridge at a gallop was a horse, dragging what remained of a carriage, the people and seats and baggage long since having emptied out and been strewn along the sides of the road. This vision of panic roused on up the hill past No. 1 Fire Engine House, between the Lawsons' and the Dwinells' houses and the crowd of students and other townspeople now drew back, fearing the fishtailing wagon might injure them. The horse came on, its nostrils distended and its eyes flashing in fright, its iron shoes clattering against the pavement. It was an awesome sight; I can never forget it.

Suddenly one man leaped from the street curb, grabbed the horse's bridle and hung on for dear life, being dragged along for at least 100 yards when the horse, exhausted, gave up. The man stood up, patted the horse's nose, spoke calming words, led him to the

nearest tree and tied him up. Then he brushed off his clothes while we all gave him a big hand. That man was your father. And when I saw a memo that that man had a son who had graduated from Harvard and that son was applying for a teaching position at my school, I said to myself, 'he couldn't be all bad, and so sight unseen and all, I thought it was worth a chance.'

That answer stayed with me my remaining year in Hawaii, but it was not long after I heard it that I recalled how narrowly I missed that "Harvard education." It is a "now it can be told" story and brings in the great help that Duxbury people gave me. I seldom tell it as the following account of my "near miss" will demonstrate, my crediting it not exactly enhanced by its retelling but here it is. I feel it may be worth recalling for Clipper readers, who have supported me so often in my recollections of our great community of Duxbury.

First of all, as graduation day approached for the Class of 1925 at Partridge Academy, George Greene, (then principal for one year, succeeding Robert Cushman, and after a while for many years superintendent of schools in Duxbury) he called 3 of us together, Tony DeLorenzo, Dorothy Walker, and me and said that we were so close in our academic averages that he did not want to stage the traditional "valedictory and salutatory" essays at graduation since we were too close really to make a fair distinction. So he had decided that each of us was to prepare an essay on a timely topic and that would constitute the substance of the ceremony. (The title of my essay was "The Organization of the World for the Prevention of War.") So that was what happened. Meanwhile Mr. Green was working hard to raise the standards of DHS. He arranged for Brattlett Bradley to enter Dartmouth (Bart graduated and went to work for the Plymouth Cordage Co. and after his return from World War II became town moderator for many years as well). With this success behind him Greene began preparations for my admission to Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, his Alma Mater. At the news of this the then Unitarian minister, John Henry Wilson, knowing me in his young people's group, said, "Well, if he's going to college, why not Harvard? The dean of Harvard was an usher at my wedding and I'm sure I can get him in there." So saying, he pulled a number of strings, several teachers helped and got me a scholarship to pay my tuition bills, and after a visit with Henry Penypacker, admissions officer, I was in except for cash for room and board.

This is where a final boost came from a graduate student of architecture, Richard Loring who said, "I think I can get Bob a job driving a launch for the crew coach on the Charles River. The job pays very well and it's lots of fun and it will provide enough cash for room and board and his savings can take care of his clothes and books." Richard had been a scoutmaster of mine when the Rev. Mr. Cunningham, the Episcopal minister in town, had sponsored a troop, so we had met before. I went by his summer residence where his dad talked with me for some time and it looked as if everything was in order. Everything that is except the critical bit of information about whether I actually could drive a motor boat, or ever had.

This basic question of whether I was qualified to be turned loose with a motor launch was constantly shunted aside. The head of the Harvard Athletic Assn. told Richard there was a vacancy due to graduation among the launch drivers and there was no doubt I could step in that spot despite the preference for athletes, and for upper classmen. I was introduced as a "lad from Duxbury," and it was understood that I'd had experience with launches and boats, although no one had actually posed the question to me. What with all these friends pulling for me surely a way would be found to provide me, perhaps secretly, with some actual experience driving a motorboat. It was generally taken for granted that

anyone born and brought up in Duxbury was bound to be able to handle a boat as a lad born and brought up in Detroit would be able to handle an automobile. Few people knew my father whose retail meat and milk businesses demanded most of our spare time as youngsters and little if any time was spent on the water except for an occasional swim in the Blue Fish River at high tide or on Duxbury Beach. Serving "summer people" to accumulate enough cash to ride through the winters was our full time summer occupation.

So shortly after matriculation I hastened down to Newell Boathouse, where litting out of launches and shells and outriggers was taking place including the installation of a couple of Chrysler marine engines of 150 horsepower in 2 launches. I walked down the dock to watch the work and one of them looked up at me and said, "This is your launch. We're about to take her for a spin down river and try her out. Want to come along?" I climbed aboard with mixed feelings. Nothing had come of my hope for a secret spin to learn how to drive this boat and here I was stepping into the trap I had let build up around me. Suppose they asked me to take the wheel? I watched as we backed neatly out of the slip and swung around and down river, under Lars Anderson Bridge (the Weeks footbridge had not yet been constructed) and the Western Ave. bridge and turned around under what was then known as the Cottage Farm bridge (now the Boston University bridge) and headed back, the engine humming beautifully and the spray flying and the wake spreading nicely astern.

A moment later without slackening speed the driver turned to me and shouted above the roar, "She's your boat; why don't you take her in?" And here I made my mistake; I should have said, "She's still a little strange, I'll have plenty of time to drive her later, so you'd better land her in the slip." But I didn't and although I cleared the bridge piers easily (after all they were 50 feet wide and the boat only 20) and headed for the boathouse float slip. I throttled her down to half speed and at about 10 miles an hour directed her bow into her berth. "Reverse engine," someone shouted, and I turned and yelled, "And strip the gears and wreck the transmission?" Whereupon someone reached over my arms, slammed her into reverse and opened the throttle wide. We arrived in a flood of foam and crashed the bow into the far end of the slip and what was worse my new boss was standing just outside the boathouse door watching this disgraceful performance. He ran down to the landing and shouted "You told us you had had experience with motor launches, but this shows you don't know the first thing about them! Be here tomorrow afternoon and take me out and show me that you can handle this boat or you're fired!"

So I had been found out. And at that moment my entire Harvard education hung in the balance. There was nothing for it but to make a clean breast of it, tell all and lose the job and leave Harvard, unless some other way could be found. Living Slater turned and walked away muttering under his breath a vocabulary he'd doubtless learned from his days on sailing ships. He later said it was only my friendship for Dick Loring that stood between me and total disaster. Of course I knew that this was the end of all the efforts to get me into and through Harvard unless something unforeseen happened and this is the best part of this story.

Arthur Sims, a black man, and operator of the largest launch (the Patricia which sported a Murray and Tregurtha engine of 350 horsepower) came over to me as I struggled to hold back the tears and began to speak very softly. "Bob" he said, "we all knew when you took the wheel of that boat as you did that you had never had your hand on a motor boat wheel before. Now we want to help you. We're sorry Slater was here to witness your catastrophe; we could have covered up for you because launch driving is not that difficult a thing. If you already know how to drive an auto on land, there's no problem about driving a motor launch on the water, that is if you know a few tricks I'll show you tomorrow morning. Skip your classes and get here real early and I'll make you the greatest launch driver on the river by mid-afternoon when Slater comes to check you out."

So next morning bright and early while all my classmates were beating the pavements to the Yard for classes I was going the other way down to the river. Arthur and I got into one of the other launches (mine had suffered a bloody nose from my treatment the afternoon before) and we drove on up river. ("Up river" so no one would see this clandestine practice session.) We landed and took off from docks and boat landings all the way up to the Watertown Arsenal - I was so good when he headed me back that I could stop at any position I wanted to - and I began to feel real confidence. He didn't let me go until I had brought the boat to a dead stop from full speed six inches from any floating object on the river.

30

### A NEAR MISS From Page 29

sculler 50 feet behind" and so on for an hour, and I didn't miss a single test. Finally he sat down in the cockpit behind me and said, "Well I guess you're OK, but you sure had me scared after you barreled that boat into the dock yesterday."

"Well, Mr. Slater," I said, "I guess the fact of the matter is I was just awfully nervous." He agreed and patted me on the back and said he now felt completely secure in giving me the job. I've often thought of that dear and good friend who came to my rescue that fateful day and rescued me and my Harvard education. I would like to think that I gave him a proper thank you for what he did, but I have no recollection that I ever gave him more than 3 casual thanks. It was the same with my uncle who saved my life one day as I was drowning under Blue Fish River bridge. I always felt uncomfortable when I realize I owe my life and destiny to other men in moments like this.

I thought of the near miss with the Harvard motor launch when my headmaster said the combination of a courageous man and a Harvard education were what convinced him to hire me as a teacher at Iolani. I almost missed that Harvard education; were it not for a kind black man I never would have gotten to first base at Harvard.

Now in retirement I discover as others must have before me the enormous significance of what seemed at one time mere casual occurrences and how human destiny has frequently turned on the most uncounscious and even unintentional acts of human beings

just doing what their ordinary lives tell them to do.

I am sure my father never knew his act of rescuing a runaway horse would so impress one of a 150 Powder Point boys that it would reshape the destiny of his son, landing him for 3 critical and joyful years on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Nor did Arthur Sims know that he was not only saving my Harvard education but also assisting in landing me on that same island. Surely we can conclude that with Hamlet "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." Act V Scene 2.